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EDITORS' GUILD OF INDIA

REPORT OF THE FACT-FINDING MISSION ON ATTACKS ON MEDIA FREEDOM IN TRIPURA



A policeman guarding the CRPF mosque at Panisagar town denying entry into the compound and also disallowing any photography. Courtesy, Caravan Magazine. Photos: CK Vijayakumar.



After reports of the Tripura government using draconian laws to deter journalists and civil society activists from reporting on the communal violence in the state began cause a major concern, the Editors' Guild of India decided to send a three-member fact-finding team to the state. The members of the team were independent journalist **Bharat Bhushan**, General Secretary of the Editors' Guild, **Sanjay Kapoor**, and Editor of 'Imphal Review of Arts and Politics' **Pradip Phanjoubam**. The team visited Tripura from **November 28 to December 1, 2021**. It met a cross-section of journalists, representatives of the state government, including the Chief Minister, ministers and the Director General of Police, as well as civil society activists, to assess the state of media freedom in Tripura.

Political and Social Context

The impatience of the Tripura administration to any criticism emanating from local media has been in evidence for a while. The state government had taken unkindly to the reporting of the pandemic and the casual manner in which the administration had gone about responding to the grave health crisis even when they had ample time to make the necessary preparations. Chief Minister Biplab Kumar Deb allegedly viewed critical reporting of the pandemic as an attempt of the media to mislead the people.

the state government, i.e. denying them official advertisements.

However, the present spate of police action has its background in the run up to the municipal elections that were due in Tripura on November 25. The competition for the 334 urban local body seats – comprising the Agartala Municipal Corporation, 12 Municipal Councils and 6 Nagar Panchayats – was intense. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) had fielded candidates for all the seats and won 112 of them -- uncontested. In the remaining 222 seats, nearly 785 candidates were in the fray.

The first difficult task before us was to interpret this tension. Were journalists from outside the state behaving as “parachute journalists” sensationalising the ordinary and banal to justify their presence in the state or hog headlines? And, by contrast, were local journalist really exercising moderation, reporting the mundane as nothing more than the mundane?

The electoral competition between the BJP and the main challenger, Trinamul Congress (TMC), had been hyped up ever since election strategist Prashant Kishor's 22-member team had been detained

The Assembly of Journalists -- a body of Tripura Journalists located at Agartala -- claimed that after the Chief Minister Deb stated on September 11, 2020, “Neither history nor I will forgive them. I am Biplab Deb, (I) do whatever I commit --you all know it. I will not spare them.” After his threat, the Assembly of Journalists, in a letter to DGP, Tripura, claimed that by December 21, 2020, 17 journalists from all over the state had been attacked and physically assaulted. A representation to the Press Council by the same body on March 20, 2021 suggests that many more members of the independent media had been attacked and punished due to serious economic blockade by

in July this year, ostensibly for violation of Covid-protocol. They had gone to do a survey of the state on behalf of the TMC.

A political analyst claimed, “After the trouncing of the BJP by the TMC in the West Bengal state elections, the BJP dispensation in Tripura wanted to prevent the TMC making an entry into the state or poaching from its support base – 60 percent of the population here are Bangla speakers, both residents as well as post-1971 migrants from Bangladesh.” He explained: “The Chief Minister is scared of the TMC and is hyper about it. He even stopped their public rallies by imposing Section



144, but had to remove it once he realised that it affected his party's campaign activities as well."

Historically, there has hardly been any latent or overt communalism in Tripura. Its Muslim population is less than 7 per cent. The Muslim population is largely along the border with Bangladesh and they are original inhabitants, i.e. not migrants from across the border from Bangladesh. While Tripura has seen internecine tribal rivalries, there is no apparent reason for the people to be communal and raising the Muslim bogey made little sense – not until 2018 when BJP came to power.

The tribal population which had voted for it in 2018 -- with the BJP forging an alliance with the tribal party, Indigenous People's Front of Tripura (IPFT), at that time – however, feels alienated because of the BJP government's failure to deliver on the election promises made to them. This was reflected in the newly formed Tipraha Indigenous Progressive Regional Alliance (TIPRA) trounced the BJP in the Tripura Tribal Areas Territorial Council elections.

The communal incidents during Durga Puja in Bangladesh provided a perfect opportunity for right wing religious organisations to polarise their cadre and voters along communal lines. Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Hindu Jagaran Manch used the violence in Tripura to stir communal sentiments in Tripura. Chief Minister Biplab Deb told the EGI team: "After communal riots in Bangladesh

similar. Some nominal arrests were made for show. No statement came from the chief minister condemning the communal violence – he left it to his Minister of Social Justice to do so."

While the violence was actively reported by the local media, but as the situation began to spiral out of control, journalists from outside the state started coming to Tripura to report on the ground situation inviting police action against some of them. The police tried to restrain two women journalists and a group of lawyers who visited some of the sites of communal violence by using serious provisions under IPC and UAPA out of control, journalists from outside the state started coming to Tripura to report on the ground situation inviting police action against some of them. The police tried to restrain two women journalists and a group of lawyers who visited some of the sites of communal violence by using serious provisions under IPC and UAPA.

The two women journalists, Samridhi Sakunia and Swarna Jha, faced two FIRs – one filed at Fatikroy Police Station, Unakoti, Tripura, and another at Kakraban police station in Udaypur, Gomati, in Tripura. Some sections of the draconian Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) were used against 102 individuals, including some journalists – one of them for tweeting "Tripura is burning."

The EGI team decided to investigate the actions of the Tripura government against journalists and examine the context within which such measures

Or, could it be that the journalists visiting from outside Tripura were in fact reporting the communal violence like any neutral observer would, while the local media houses were unable to do the same because they were controlled and pressured by the state through its carrot (of advertisements) and stick policy?

1.30 lakh people in Tripura came out in the streets. There were 250 (public) protests because people here have family and relations across the border." However, as a civil society activist pointed out, "While Bangladesh arrested 419 for their involvement in communal violence during Durga Puja, the Tripura Police did not do anything

were taken.

Local vs. Outside Journalists

What became evident was that a wedge was sought to be created between local and outside journalists on how these communal incidents



“As the revenue of the newspapers is from government ads, stoppage of ads leads to newspaper collapse. Many local cable TV channels have also closed down because they did not follow the government line. These include Mrinalini ENN, Din-Raat, Akash Tripura and Hallbol. Duranto TV in Udaypur was ransacked a few months back,” a senior functionary of THRO claimed.

were being reported. This tension was not so prominent, but, nonetheless, it was stoked. Some reporters and civil society activists coming to the state were outrightly seen by entities close to the government as conspirators in cahoots with the TMC.

The picture that the state government officials painted was of an “outsider” media given to outrage and a local state-based media that was sober and moderate on the matters of communalism.

The first difficult task before us was to interpret this tension. Were journalists from outside the state behaving as “parachute journalists” sensationalising the ordinary and banal to justify their presence in the state to hog headlines? And, by contrast, were local journalist really exercising moderation, reporting the mundane as nothing more than the mundane? Or, could it be that the journalists visiting from outside Tripura were in fact reporting the communal violence like any neutral observer would, while the local media houses were unable to do the same because they were controlled and pressured by the state through its carrot (of advertisements) and stick policy?

Our impression was that while one might be tempted to claim that there was some truth on both sides, on balance, however, it seemed that the media from outside Tripura was in a better position to report independently and in an unbiased manner than its local counterpart.

The Tripura government also displays a dichotomy in its handling of media. While it shows some comfort dealing with the local media, which can be manipulated to peddle their narrative, it is the outside media it strives to tame. In return, local publications are showered with government

advertising. National newspapers, freelance journalists and the new genre online publications are deeply resented and demonised.

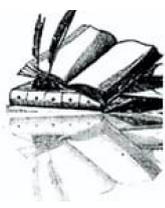
State-Media relations

Most state governments know that the local media relies on the revenue from government advertisements for its survival. These advertisements, if distributed in fair and transparent manner, based on objective criterion (e.g. verified circulation), can, in principle, allow the media to play its watch-dog role. However, they can also be used as instruments of pressure and manipulation. Tripura, we found, was no exception to this.

Like most state governments, the government in Tripura was prompt in denying or tightening the tap on government advertisements to a media platform. The ones that were critical were denied ads. And if the denial of ads did not lead to changing their ways, then goons were used to beat up critical journalists

According to the Tripura Human Rights Organisation (THRO), the pressure on media in the state was “tremendous” and that most of the local media had “surrendered” to the government. “As the revenue of the newspapers is from government ads, its stoppage leads to newspaper collapse. Many local cable TV channels have also closed down because they did not toe the government line. These include Mrinalini ENN, Din-Raat, Akash Tripura and Hallbol. Duranto TV in Udaypur was ransacked a few months back,” a senior functionary of THRO claimed.

A journalist recounted how 8 TV news channels had been disconnected in the last 14 months and the offices of two newspapers – Pratibadi Kalam and Daily Desherkatha (official organ of the



CPI-M) -- were attacked by BJP supporters. All government advertisement have been stopped in 4 Tripura-based newspapers and 24 newspapers that are published from outside the state.

“The previous CPI-M government was intolerant of criticism, but under the BJP led government the persecution of the media is much more intense. No newspaper can write against Chief Minister Biplab Deb as threats allegedly loom of government advertising being cut off. So the media is now given to publishing his press releases with his picture displayed prominently on the front page,” he claimed.

Representatives of civil society told our team that the local media was largely silent about

communalism and on atrocities against the minorities. “Phone calls go from the Chief Minister’s office to TV channels with officials threatening them if they invite guests who are critical of the government. They also have lists of guests who are approved by them and who they would like to see in TV debates and discussions,” informed an activist. The CM Deb, though, laughed off these suggestions.

To see how the state views the media, one of our team members decided to attend the belated celebration of the National Press Day during our visit. Although the National Press Day is on November 16, the day the Press Council of India became functional, in Agartala, the celebration was delayed because of the civic elections as well as



Barely 30kms away from the Bangladesh border, Panisagar is a small and seemingly peaceful town located about 6hours away from Agartala, by road. However it became the epicenter of the protests against the Bangladesh communal violence incident. Courtesy, The Caravan.

Photos by CK Vikayakumar



the communal trouble we were following.

The National Press Day event was more like an official function, with ministers (including the Chief Minister) and high-ranking officials on the dais, and journalists in the audience. It was also quite disturbing to see that the entire proceedings were about these ministers and government functionaries sermonising the journalists on the meaning of freedom of speech and its interpretation. Instead of the event being treated as an occasion for journalists to communicate their concerns about the state of the media freedom in the state, ministers and government officials were telling the latter what they should do to live up to media ideals in a democracy.

There were also patronising reminders from many of the speakers on how the present government was media friendly, how it had increased the advertisement budget, enhanced the pension for accredited journalists, extended health insurance to media persons, provided subsidised housing etc. Seven senior media persons (all males) were then awarded for their contribution to journalism with a certificate and a token amount of cash.

What became evident was an unspoken patron-client relationship between the government and the media, which the latter has not only accepted but also normalised, so that the matter no longer evokes any sense of unease or outrage. It were as if this patron-client equation had now become part of common sense so that the need for questioning this proximity between the power corridors and journalists has become somewhat redundant.

Even during the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, journalists were hauled up for writing about oxygen shortage in hospitals. The Chief Minister claimed that the media was “misreporting good governance” and even threatened that “I will not leave them”.

Was this always like this? It does not seem to be so. While previous regimes, most recently the Manik Sarkar-led CPI-M government, which the BJP ousted, could not be termed press friendly, most journalists we met claimed that but they were never as vehement in their responses to adverse reportage. And they also did not care to go out of their way to appease the media, local journalists claimed.

In our interactions with government officials and ministers, including the Chief Minister, a pattern seemed to emerge of using a carrot and stick policy to control the media. The carrot was the monetary incentives that the government claimed they were extending to the media and the stick was the threat of FIRs, including charging them under UAPA, which gives the police not only the power to arrest, but also to award severe penalties without the arbitration of the judiciary. The casual manner in which this draconian Act was being invoked by the state police for even the deemed offence of a tweet that said “Tripura is burning” was scary.

Communal Violence -- from Denial to ‘Misreporting’

On October 26, after communal incidents against the minority Hindu population in Bangladesh, protests and marches were organised by the VHP and Hindu Jagaran Manch in various parts of the state.

The government officials and ministers we met repeatedly underplayed the communal violence, one even going to the extent of claiming that “the Union Home Ministry has cleared the air by saying that there were no communal incidents”. Their common refrain, however, was that “outside elements” had created the situation because “some vested interests (read, TMC) wanted to make a dent in the Tripura municipal elections”.

While not denying that mainly the VHP and Hindu Jagaran Manch had taken out rallies (250 by the Chief Minister’s own count), a minister told us, and “This was a political conspiracy hatched by the TMC and the CPI-M. Rumours were spread by them that two mosques were burned down. That did not happen. There were only some VHP rallies taken out with the permission of the government.”

“There was provocation in Bangladesh and that had a reaction here. The VHP tried to unite the Hindu sentiment here. We tackled it quickly but you must understand that the VHP is an independent body. Some people did enter mosques with an ulterior motive but they were prevented from doing anything,” the minister told us.

But, was that really what happened? While the EGI



team was in no position to go to the spots where communal conflict had taken place, we spoke to several local journalists to get their assessment of what had transpired.

Recounting the genesis of the crisis, a senior journalist told us that trouble began with a series of protest rallies taken out by Hindutva outfits beginning October 21 against attacks on some Durga Puja pandals in Bangladesh on October 15. October 22 onwards, rumours began circulating from unestablished sources that Hindu temples and images of Hindu Gods were being desecrated at various places in Tripura. In particular, there was the rumour of a Kali image found smashed. On October 26, these organization took out another rally, with very provocative slogans which we are desisting from repeating in this report. Some of the people in these rallies then allegedly attacked some mosques.

The police narrative is that no used mosque were attacked and that only abandoned ones had some

found an alternate and safer explanation for a particular incident, it was generalised to what happened everywhere too. Thus, when a mob was prevented from attacking a well-known masjid and they took out their ire by burning down a structure used for prayer, some distance away from the mosque at Kakraban area of Gomati district in Tripura, that incident was used to build the narrative that only a prayer hall and not a mosque was burnt. This, then, became the general explanation to push the argument that no mosques were targeted.

Dealing with Critical Voices

We conducted interviews with two women journalists – Samriddhi Sakunia and Swarna Jha – who had been dramatically arrested for reporting on the Panisagar incident. They both work for HW news, which was earlier known as Hindu World News.

Of the two, Samriddhi Sakunia has written for

Both women journalists were accused of incitement to violence and disturbing communal harmony. Though a day later, the Agartala Court granted them bail, the condition for the bail was that they had to present themselves every time police summoned them to Tripura's capital. Later, their Associate Editor, Arti Gargi, was also made a co-accused after she had been summoned as a witness to the case. Swarna was threatened by her interrogators, trying to turn her as an approver against Samriddhi if she wanted to be let off.

damage done to them. However, local journalists claim that their information was that at least 10 mosques across the state were attacked and damaged. One of them even quoted police officers who had been cynical of the government's version and said on assurance of anonymity, "When does a mosque cease to be a mosque? If a temple is no longer in active use, would that structure cease to be a temple?" An Agartala-based journalist interviewed by our team claimed that he had seen three mosques with varying degrees of damages and that he had also confirmed from local district journalists there were more which suffered similar damage.

The police narrative seems to be an afterthought to underplay the conflict. Whenever the police

foreign and Indian publications. She had been engaged with the developments in Tripura long before the communal incidents around Durga Puja in Bangladesh began to spin out of control. She had tweeted about the grave happenings in Tripura where places of prayer were allegedly being torched. Tripura police had called her to tell her that she was tweeting fake news and action would be taken against her. They also asked her about her sources.

Samriddhi Sakunia had wanted to follow up on the Tripura incidents. On November 13, HW sent a team of two reporters—Samriddhi Sakunia and Swarna Jha – to Tripura. They had both joined the network in September–October 2021.



After landing in Agartala, they went to the Dargabazar locality. It had been reported that a mosque had allegedly been burnt and vandalised there. Samriddhi, who has a twitter following of 25k+ followers, tweeted about what she saw in Dargabazar. Accompanied by Swarna, who is a video journalist, they took videos of the torched mosque, shops etc. However, it seemed that Tripura police had more problems with Samriddhi Sakunia's tweets, rather than HW reports.

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A BJP leader, explained, “Media has good relations with the government here. Independent journalism is absent here because the media is ‘adjustable’ and willing to compromise. The UAPA charges were made against outside media and not local media. Most journalists are happy here because they get pensions, health insurance and low cost housing. If there is tension with the media then it is quickly resolved – it is relationship between big brother and small brother. Local media did not write directly against the government. It is the outside media that came here and did that.”

On the second day of their visit to Tripura – the duo went to Chamtila mosque- police calls it a prayer hall- in Panisagar area. Tripura Police had denied that anything wrong had taken place there. However, Samriddhi and Swarna found that a mosque had been vandalised – its windows were broken and its electricity connections had been yanked off.

Both the journalists were subjected to intimidation while in Panisagar. They were told by the police to come to Agartala who claimed that they were provoking the locals. However, the two reporters decided to drive to Assam for safety, but were brought back to Tripura from Neelambazaar on the Assam side of the border. Overnight they were made to stay in an empty shelter home meant for distressed women by the Tripura Police. The caretaker of the shelter home wanted to take away their mobile phones, but they managed to resist the pressure.

Their arrest came close to midnight. It was shown in response to 2 FIRs -- one by a member of VHP and the other by a district official. Both were accused of incitement to violence and

off. However, she spurned the offer. She was also threatened with UAPA, which does not allow for bail for six months.

The Supreme Court's single member bench has stayed the FIR against the two journalists thus ending their agony to travel to Tripura in response to police summons.

The visit of Samriddhi and Swarna had taken place in the wake of a four-member fact-finding team of lawyers from Delhi led by advocate Ehtisham Hashmi. All of them had been booked by the Tripura police under UAPA. We interviewed one of the team members.

The lawyers' fact finding team report had photographs and stories of the victims of communal violence and their stories made it amply clear that there was great merit in the alarm expressed by the many civil society activists that the state of Tripura was in a bad shape.

At least two members of the team have been served notices under Indian Penal Code Section 41 A to appear before a police officer for charges levied against them. The charges are based on their press conference which they addressed in Agartala after they concluded their visit in



early November and their social media posts. Two members of the team were served notices by Tripura police to “immediately delete these fabricated and false statements/comments made/

The police then proceeded to charge them under UAPA as well under the IPC for promoting enmity between different groups on grounds of religion, forging information for the purpose of causing

The communal incidents during Durga Puja in Bangladesh provided a perfect opportunity for right-wing religious organisations to polarise their cadre and voters along communal lines. The VHP and Hindu Jagaran Manch used the violence to stir communal sentiments in Tripura. Chief Minister Biplab Deb told the EGI team: “After communal riots in Bangladesh, 1.30 lakh people in Tripura came out in the streets. There were 250 (public) protests because people here have family and relations across the border.”



Man on motorcycle drives past a scene of mob arson in Panisagar: Courtesy: The Caravan. Photos by CK Vikayakumar

circulated by in the social media”.

harm, criminal intimidation, intentional insult with intent to provoke the breach of peace and criminal



conspiracy.

Their report, “Humanity under attack in Tripura; #Muslim lives matter” had claimed that the BJP government in Tripura could have stopped the communal violence if it wanted to but instead it gave a free hand to the Hindutva mobs in the state. It also pointed out that the VHP, Bajrang Dal and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh had organised the rallies which led to the communal conflict and that they had brought JCB machines (used in construction and demolition) along with them.

UAPA was also invoked against more than a hundred social media posts (102 originally) and the process of identifying those who posted them was on.

Police Narrative

The DGP of police spent considerable amount of time telling our team that reporters must learn the difference between a prayer hall and a mosque. He also tried to showcase the police force as neutral by claiming that a Bajrang Dal rally had been stopped by the police in Gomati district and 14 protestors had been booked.

He said that an incident took place in Panisagar on October 26 when the VHP took out a rally. He claimed that not a mosque but a “prayer hall” was set on fire. No holy book was targeted and set on fire. Yet, rumours were spread that the holy book had been burnt. “The ground in fact was peaceful and the local media was reporting that the area was peaceful,” he claimed.

However, he said, “The social media platforms started exaggerating the situation on the ground claiming that 15 mosques had been set ablaze, women had been molested and that there was a massacre (narsanhar) taking place in Tripura. One October 27, we banned people from going to that area. However, under media pressure, the very next day we had to withdraw that order. But, we said that anyone going there would be held responsible if an untoward incident takes place.”

The DGP repeated the official trope that “outside” groups of clergy, lawyers and reporters stoked communal tensions after the initial incident – some even claiming that “Tripura is on fire.” He said that the government then set up a committee to look into social media posts and that committee listed 238 objectionable posts. “We initially took

action against 102 posts and against those who posted them under UAPA. Of these, 14 originated in Bangladesh. Then we found 26 additional posts. So, action was taken in all against 128 posts and those responsible for them. Of those who posted these malicious messages on social media perhaps a couple were journalists. Unless we know their identity we cannot say who is journalist and who is not. We sent out 7 notices and one was to a journalist who had claimed Tripura was burning.”

As for the two women journalists and the fact-finding team of lawyers from Delhi, the DGP said that he believed that they were linked. “The lawyers sent these women journalists, we believe. They went wherever the lawyers had gone. Like the lawyers they too said on social media that a mosque had been burnt and a holy book had also been burnt. The lawyers had taken away some burnt pieces of paper printed with Arabic script. These women also posted a picture of what they called were burnt bits of the holy book. They said that they had seen a burnt copy of the holy book. We asked them to give us the evidence, but they said the lawyers had taken the pages away. They were also provoking people to say that the VHP had done this and that they should lodge complaints with the police,” he claimed.

The two women journalists were asked to come to Agartala as the police wanted to seek their explanation on their social media posts. “They came half way and then fled towards Assam. So we were forced to act against them. They were arrested in Assam and then brought back here. They got bail the very next day,” the DGP claimed. He also questioned their bonafides as journalists saying that the police found that they had registered as “students” in their hotel in Agartala.

The DGP was at pains to point out that the Tripura police had not invoked any draconian law against the two women journalists or the others charged under the UAPA (there was no UAPA against the women journalists). “We used the mildest andailable sections of the UAPA where offences and penalties are up to 7 years imprisonment and therefore do not require them to be arrested. We did not charge them under Chapters 4 and 6 of the UAPA which relate to terrorism and prevent bail being granted. Our aim was only to restrain them and we did not want anyone to be denied bail,” he explained.



Conclusion

The Tripura Police and the administration have displayed lack of professionalism and integrity in dealing with the communal conflict and with those reporting on the issue. This makes them complicit in the growth of muscular majoritarianism that subverts democratic institutions. The result of this subversion of institutions has been visible everywhere. Grand conspiracy theories have been cooked up to show how independent journalism that exposes communal violence and the rise of Hindu majoritarianism is an attempt by the enemies of the state to undermine a democratically elected government. Hence, reporting and Tweeting -- law enforcement agencies claim -- about the violence in that state, is a criminal act. This is the reason why the police and the ruling party faithful see a design in the tweets and expectedly drag neighbouring Pakistan as being responsible in this exposure of social instability in Tripura when they dramatically confide in you -- one tweet is even from Pakistan.

Ever since this matter blew up, the police and an insecure political leadership have used draconian laws like UAPA and the might of the police and a pliant judiciary to pulverize the civil society that includes the media -- mostly from outside the state. Fact-finding missions of Supreme Court lawyers have been served notices under UAPA for sharing their findings on the violence against minorities in a press conference! Women journalists were charged with incitement when they were performing their journalistic duty of asking questions from witnesses to the torching of mosques and shops.

The reason why the police used UAPA against those who had just tweeted “ Tripura is burning” was not just to stop others from tweeting about the happenings in the border state , but also to forcefully establish the dominance of the state’s narrative. It was due to this reason that despite over two hundred rallies organised by the VHP and its fraternal radical Hindu outfits against the violent happenings in Bangladesh, and various acts of vandalising mosques and torching of shops owned by Muslims, there were no arrests of those till the courts stepped in. This culture of impunity epitomizes the conduct of the state government.

While most state governments, especially those in

smaller states, are given to pressuring the media, the attitude of the current Tripura government towards the media seems particularly egregious. While it has been able to condition and manipulate the local media to prevent free expression, it has been less successful with media based outside the state or journalists visiting the state from other parts of India. The instrument of withholding of government advertisement cannot be used against them with the same efficacy as in the case of locally based media.

The communal rioting in Bangladesh during Durga Puja came at a time when Chief Minister Biplab Deb and his party, the BJP, were preparing to take on the challenge of the Trinamool Congress in the upcoming civic elections. Counter communal mobilisation in reaction to the violence against the Hindu minority in Bangladesh offered an opportunity to the fraternal organisations of the BJP – the VHP, Hindu Jagaran Manch, Bajrang Dal and others – to foment communal anger to consolidate their vote amongst the Hindu Bengali population of the state. The communalism was sought to be justified as a ‘natural reaction’ of the Hindus of Tripura as they had family links with the Hindu population across the border in Bangladesh.

While the local press either covered before the state government and was too afraid of the ground reality as it was, journalists writing for national media or for media based outside the state tried to report the communal violence for what it was. This did not suit the narrative of good governance the Biplab Deb government was desirous of projecting. It also seemed hyper sensitive to the campaign challenge being posed by the TMC whose youth leader Shyaoni Ghosh had been arrested for merely raising the slogan “Khela Hobe” and slapped with attempt to murder charges.

Anyone who wrote critically of the government was immediately dubbed as part of a “TMC conspiracy” which threatened the careful narrative that the incumbent government wanted to build about itself. It was important for it to quash the electoral challenge being posed by the TMC because losing the municipal elections would set the context for the 2023 state assembly elections. The BJP had snatched the state from the CPI-M and to lose it to the TMC would be seen as an ideological defeat.



It seems, with these calculations in mind, the Tripura government cracked down on anyone tweeting or posting anything critical of the government and its handling of the communal conflict on Facebook and YouTube. It may have also helped that the DGP of Tripura is a superannuated officer who has been given a two year tenure by the Chief Minister. There is already speculation about his being given a further extension like the Central government has done for several key officials. Whether this is possible or not is another matter but that is the impression amongst officials in Agartala about a “pliable” police chief. Even those sympathetic to the government claim, “What they have done to the journalists and the lawyers is an over-reaction and they will have to retrace their steps.” Chief Minister Deb has ordered a review of these UAPA and other cases, but nothing tangible has taken place.

Even the local media, when it is not trading charges over which media house is being favoured and which is being pushed against the wall by the government, claims quite unequivocally, “This government is totally against the media.”

The Tripura government’s attitude of ‘heads-I-win-tails-you-lose’ is evident in the Chief Minister now taking credit for ordering a “review” of the UAPA cases against journalists and others. A civil society activist explained this saying, “For the first time in the history of Tripura they used UAPA against journalists but then the Supreme Court intervened. They knew that the Supreme Court can come down heavily on them so the government has decided to order a review of the UAPA cases against journalists.”

As for the state of journalism in Tripura, the government and its supporters cannot come to terms with the fact that not all media has fallen in line. A BJP leader, in a matter of fact manner, explained, “Media has good relations with the government here. Independent journalism is absent here because the media is ‘adjustable’ and willing to compromise. The UAPA charges were made against outside media and not local media. Most journalists are happy here because they get pensions, health insurance and low cost housing. If there is tension with the media then it is quickly resolved – it is relationship between big brother and small brother. Local media did not write directly against the government. It is the outside

media that came here and did that.” He dismissed the attacks on local newspaper offices, including on the CPI-M’s mouthpiece, as acts of “over-enthusiasm”.

The previous governments, including the CPI-M government led by Manik Sarkar, which was the immediate predecessor of the BJP government, were not exactly known for being press friendly. However, the conclusion of local journalists was that none of them were as sensitive about adverse criticism as the present BJP government led by Biplab Kumar Deb. We agree with this surmise.

The Tripura government seems to believe that it is working according to the larger nationalist vision of the BJP in which the media also has a role to play -- not as a foil to the government but as its partner in the nationalist project. The government therefore tends to see media compliance in this partnership as part of the larger mission. This allows it to justify using all means within its power to bring the recalcitrant elements within the media to heel. Indeed, the Chief Minister’s statement during the National Press Day, widely reported in the local media -- “An ideal nation must have an ideal press” -- seems to corroborate this.

Fact Finding Mission

Bharat Bhushan
Sanjay Kapoor (General Secretary EGI)
Pradip Phanjoubam



TIMELINE OF EVENTS

OCTOBER 15TH, 2021

In Bangladesh, several Durga Puja pandals and temples were vandalised after social media post showing a copy of Quran placed at the feet of an idol (Hanuman) went viral. Following this attacks on Hindu minority were reported. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina issued a warning to the perpetrators of the violence and arrested few people involved in this incident.

OCTOBER 21ST, 2021

To protest against the violence in Bangladesh, few rallies were taken out by religious organisations – including Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Hindu Jagran Manch (HJM)- in different parts of Tripura. Participants in a rally taken out by VHP and HJM at Udaipur in Gomati district on October 21st clashed with police as the latter denied them permission to enter localities with mixed populations. During these rallies, some miscreants vandalised mosques, shops and houses. Fifteen people including three policemen were injured in the incident. In West Tripura, rallies were taken out in Agartala. In North Tripura, Dharmanagar, a rally including 10,000 people was taken out by different organisations including VHP and the HJM.

OCTOBER 22ND, 2021

A memorandum was submitted to the Chief Minister Biplab Kumar Deb's Office by the Tripura State Jamiat Ulama (Hind), which alleged that different mosques and localities where minorities live were being attacked and people were scared to get out of their homes. They requested intervention from Chief Minister Biplab Deb and Director General of Tripura Police VS Yadav.

OCTOBER 23RD, 2021

Rumours started circulating both online and offline. One of the rumors pertained to an image of a broken Shiva idol that went viral on social media platforms. Later, Police said that the Shiva idol was found at a local hilltop which is surrounded by thick vegetation and it's an abandoned place. Police said that there is no surety if someone broke it or it was broken due to natural causes.

OCTOBER 26TH, 2021

In North Tripura, a protest rally was taken out by VHP at Panisagar, where few protesters allegedly vandalised a few houses and shops at Rowa Bazar. A local mosque was vandalised at Chamtilla village In Churaibari, later in the night of 26th October, people from minority group showed up in large numbers.

OCTOBER 29TH, 2021

Few miscreants vandalised a local thatched-walled Kali Temple in Kailashahar of Unakoti district. Later, local Hindus and Muslims came together and rebuild the thatched walls of the temple. A four-member fact-finding team of Supreme Court lawyers visited the area on 29th - 30th October and released a report titled, Humanity under attack in Tripura; #Muslim lives matter, highlighting the anti-Muslim nature of violence.

OCTOBER 30TH, 2021

The High Court of Tripura admitted suo moto Public Interest Litigation (PIL) based on press reports of the Panisagar incident. The High Court directed the state government to submit an affidavit by November 10 on its plan and preventive measures taken in maintaining law and order and in restoring peace.

NOVEMBER 3RD, 2021

Tripura Police issued a notice to the members of fact-finding team. Delhi based lawyer Mukesh and Ansar Indori received a notice that a case has been registered against them for "promoting enmity between religious groups as well as provoking people of different religious communities to commit breach of peace", under section 13 of the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA), apart from other Indian Penal Code (IPC) sections. For this, the two find themselves charged under an anti-terror law.

The UAPA cases were filed against 102 individuals and organisations for their social media posts and statements. Those who stand accused include journalists for protesting, or even merely mentioning, the communal violence on social media platforms and asked social media platforms to freeze their accounts. Several people filed a petition with the Supreme Court seeking to quash the UAPA charges registered against them.

Upon a complaint by AITC spokesperson Saket



Gokhale, the National Human Rights Commission on November 3 sought a report on the riot from Chief Secretary of the state and Director General of Police.

NOVEMBER 15TH, 2021

Two female journalists from HW news were arrested from Assam for fomenting a “sense of hatred between communities” by circulating “doctored videos”, after members of Vishwa Hindu Parishad had filed a complaint against them (in Tripura) for reporting on an incident of mosque burning and thereby, “maligned the image of Tripura government”. The Editors Guild of India asked for a swift withdrawal of all charges, and characterized the police actions as a foil to deflect public attention from its own failings in dealing with majoritarian violence.

The Chief Judicial Magistrate of Gomati district granted them bail against sureties of INR 7500.

NOVEMBER 17TH, 2021

The Supreme Court of India granted immunity to all coercive action. A bench of Chief Justice N V Ramana and Justices D Y Chandrachud and Surya Kant issued notices to the Centre and the Tripura government on the joint petition filed by the three (Mukesh Kumar, Ansarul Haq Ansari, and Shyam Meera Singh) after hearing advocate Prashant Bhushan briefly.

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